

Northgate gets thumbs up

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THE DEPARTMENT of Tourism, Environment and Conservation has given the go-ahead for the construction of the controversial R1,6 billion Northgate development, north of Kimberley.

The authorisation for the project, which is subject to certain conditions, was granted on Friday.

Members of the public who wish to appeal an aspect of the authorisation now have 10 days, or until Monday November 17, to lodge an Intent of Appeal with the MEC, Pieter Saalman, which must be followed by an appeal within 30 days.

The MEC, after considering the relevant facts and supporting documents, will have the right to uphold the original decision, with or without modifications, or reverse the original decision.

No time-frame has been stipulated for the MEC's decision.

Fears have been expressed that the development could endanger the Lesser Flamingo population at Kamfers Dam, which supports the largest permanent population of Lesser Flamingos in southern Africa and is one of only four breeding sites for the species in Africa.

The development thrust the city into the spotlight after it was featured on M-Net's Carte Blanche.

A massive Save the Flamingo campaign was launched to address the threats to Kamfers Dam, its flamingos as well as to encourage local authorities to preserve Kamfers Dam and its buffer zone as a conservancy area and "not permit inappropriate developments with resultant negative impacts on the dam and its flamingos".

Soon after the campaign was launched, three scientists from the Department of Economic Affairs, Tourism, Environment and Conservation, Mark Anderson, Julius Koen and Eric Herrmann, all from the department's scientific investigations section, were suspended, apparently as a result of complaints received about their attempts to secure the future of the Kamfers Dam for posterity.

A court case is currently pending regarding the disciplinary charges against Anderson, who has since resigned.

Lionel Koster from Group 1, the developers of the Northgate development, yesterday welcomed the decision to grant the authorisation.

"We are very excited. Very stringent conditions have been stipulated and need to be upheld, including fulfilling the conditions of the Environmental Management Plan, which is aimed at ensuring the least possible disturbance for the Flamingos at Kamfers Dam."

He added that these conditions would be monitored on a daily basis

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Lionel Koster

and include stipulations like no blasting on the site, no petrol stations and ensuring the enforcement of the bio-diversity offset agreement.

"In terms of this agreement, we have committed funds, R10 million over 10 years, for education regarding the Flamingos as well as tourism."

Some of this money will also be spent on pumping water to a nearby pan, as well as the building of an artificial breeding island on this pan, to ensure that the flamingos have an alternative site if necessary.

"We don't want to chase the flamingos away from Kamfers Dam but we felt that if there were two pans and two breeding islands, then it would be all the better."

He pointed out that the alternative pan, which was 40 000 hectares, was already used by Flamingos when it rained at Kamfers Dam. Koster said he also hope to enlist

the support and expertise of all those who were involved in the building of the first breeding island. "We would really like to get to a point where we can work with the environmentalists, rather than against them. No one is gaining from the fighting."

He pointed out that no time-frame was stipulated for the MEC's final decision but if it was by the end of the year and if it was favourable, work would start on phase one by the beginning of next year.

"Phase one includes an alternative sewerage plant, so that no sewerage from the development will go into the Homevale Sewerage Works. It will also include six housing complexes (of between 72 and 106 units each), as well as a shopping centre in the latter half of the first phase."

He added that the first phase would take 18 months to complete but the first housing complex would be finished by October if work started in January.

Brenda Booth, the landowner of the property on which the flamingo breeding island is situated and which is adjacent to the property on which the proposed Northgate development is to take place, said her immediate response to the go-ahead was "shocked disbelief".

"It is difficult to comment on the approval which is vague in several respects. A further complication is the fact that the outcome of our ap-

peal against the rezoning of the land from agricultural to residential and commercial by the Sol Plaatje Municipality is yet to be made public," Booth, who is also a member of the Northern Cape Rangers' Association, said.

"Since the Right of Decision (ROD) by the MEC does not state that the three sensitive areas adjoining the property on which the island is situated (as motivated in our appeal) be excluded from the said development, we feel that the unique scientific and environmental achievement represented by the breeding island on our property which has resonated around the world and brought acclaim to South Africa, to Kimberley and to the scientists involved - Mark Anderson in particular - will be seriously threatened," she added.

"That a department whose avowed aim is conservation of our natural heritage and under whose auspices the Flamingo Project was initiated could have approved a development potentially destructive of one of its only internationally acclaimed conservation successes is not only incomprehensible but is indicative of a massive failure of governance."

She added that the decision would undoubtedly be appealed by environmentalists all over the world as international interest in this project and its success was ongoing and prolific.

Bestie Prysse